

TIM GEE

YOU CAN'T EVICT AN IDEA

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Photo by Andrea Bakacs

INTRODUCTION

On 15 October 2011 the world witnessed one of the biggest ever simultaneous acts of protest, as people in 900 places across the globe adopted the name and tactic 'Occupy'. One of them was London, where a camp was established near the steps of St Paul's Cathedral, which continued through the winter and became the longest standing Occupy camp in the world.

For me, the timing was fortuitous. I had recently been given a regular slot as a writer for the *New Internationalist*. In the same week that Occupy London began, my book - *Counterpower* - was published, looking at the history of radical protest from the 1790s to the Arab Spring. I was also due to start a speaking tour of bookstores and campaign groups across the US and UK. When I did so, one question came up again and again: What can we learn from the Occupy movement? My answers are in these short essays.

Of course my view is only one of many and I was always careful to point out that I couldn't speak for the movement as a whole. Indeed whilst I used every opportunity celebrate the achievements of Occupy, I also made efforts to share where I thought the movement wasn't going in a direction that would win the change we need.

I was part of Occupy from the start. I was at the first open planning meeting for Occupy London which took place during an occupation of Westminster Bridge on 9 October - part of a UKUNCUT protest against NHS privatisation. There were speakers from Occupy Wall Street and the *Indignados* in Spain and I gave a brief historical perspective of occupations of the past. We then broke into groups and made the decision *en masse* to occupy the London Stock Exchange the following week.

I joined the occupation itself as the group was deciding on the initial statement and demands. I wrote an article about that process for the *New Internationalist*, and then another one - this one tracing a history of protest camping - for the first issue of the movement newspaper *The Occupied Times of*

London. As I got involved in the camp, I also became a regular contributor to both publications, which often carried the same articles. As a result, other blogs and newspapers began requesting articles on the subject of Occupy.

As campaigning journalism, the aim of the articles was several-fold. I wanted to provide encouragement to the people involved and spread the word to those not involved. As different lines of criticism were made in parts of the media, the articles were also meant as retorts. But most of all I wanted to nudge the inspiring people around me towards the kinds of strategy and tactics that I thought would be necessary for transformational change. This collection is a continuation of that aim.

The essays that follow were written in the heat of the struggle. They are a view from the frontline of what happened, the impact it had, and most of all, what we can learn as we build towards the next stage.

THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE

October 2011

'Micheck.'

'Micheck.'

I've been on a lot of protests in my life but I've never heard this call and response before:

'Micheck.'

'Micheck.'

'What does it mean?' I ask the person sitting next to me.

'Mic. Check - When someone shouts it we repeat so that everything can be heard.'

I've just stepped off the train at Fenchurch Street after a weekend of book talks in Sussex, and head straight to the steps of St Paul's Cathedral to show my support for one of the latest additions to the global 'Occupy' movement - Occupy London. The protest had begun the day before with an attempt to enter the London Stock Exchange. Held back by police and security, the movement instead set up camp outside St Paul's. On the wall someone has put up a new sign: 'Tahrir Square, City of Westminster.'

‘Mic. Check (Mic. Check). It’s time for the people’s assembly.’ A cheer goes up. Never before have I seen people so excited at the idea of having a meeting. Then again, never before have I seen a meeting quite like this. Every statement is repeated by everyone. Every suggestion is tested for consensus. Anyone can have their say.

A group had spent the day drafting some principles for the occupation – just as the Egyptians decided their demands only when the demonstrations converged on Tahrir Square.

The suggestions for Occupy London are read out, one by one:

‘1. The current system is broken. It is undemocratic and unjust. We need alternatives; this is where we work towards them.’

A young man springs up to make an amendment. He points out that David Cameron uses the word ‘broken’, and the word ‘unsustainable’ brings in the environmental perspective. A woman points out that the system was never fixed in the first place, and that we shouldn’t advocate a return to business as usual.

‘Do we have consensus?’

People wave their hands in the air – silent clapping – a way of showing support for a proposal in non-hierarchical meetings.

‘We have consensus.’

The silent clapping turns to very loud clapping, with whooping and cheering as well.

And so we continue. The details are fine but they are important. When it is suggested that we adopt the statement ‘We refuse to pay for the bankers’ crisis’, a quiet bank worker takes to the microphone and politely requests that we focus on the system rather than demonizing the workers. We change it to ‘the banks’ crisis’. Consensus again.

Not every amendment is accepted. A suggestion that we state that we are of ‘all ideologies’ is comprehensively blocked – presumably because some ideologies are so reprehensible that they would not be welcome at the occupation. But the atmosphere is always constructive.

The conversations are frequently interrupted as the police begin building barriers which look as if they could be to fence the protest in. A group rushes to confront the police while the meeting decides what to do. After police ‘assurances’ that the fences will only be for keeping a fire route clear a protester

suggests that we build the barrier instead, out of bunting. The police have been backed into a corner, and start taking the fencing away.

We continue. We add opposition to cuts, an end to global tax injustice, and actions against wars and arms dealing. It is messy, and it is drawn out, but we reach decisions far faster than Parliament does.

Of course, occupying squares alone will not lead to these demands being met. We can learn from the Egyptians that it was not only public camping that led to the downfall of Mubarak but the refusal to follow the orders of the police and the growing threat of a general strike. Few believe that occupying St Paul's steps alone will change the system. But it is an important building block.

The latest wave of unrest may have started in North Africa, but now it is global - reaching hundreds of cities across the world. A statement endorsed and discussed by a significant number of occupations calls undemocratic international institutions 'our global Mubarak, our global Assad, our global Gaddafi'.

And so finishes the Occupy London statement: This is what democracy looks like. Come and join us!



PREVIOUS CONVICTIONS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROTEST CAMPING

October 2011

The year 2011 has seen a blossoming of protest camping. First there was the tented city in Egypt's Tahrir Square, then the *Indignados* in Spain, then the youth protests in Israel, then Occupy Wall Street in the USA. Now in hundreds of towns and cities across the world people have taken to the outdoors and set up tents as part of a global revolt against neo-liberalism. On the face of it, camping does not seem like the most likely tactic to bring about the transformation of power relations in society. But it has frequently played a role in movements for change.

More than a century ago, in the context of a financial crisis, thousands of people camped outside the British Embassy in Persia to demand democracy and limits on the power of the Shah. Protesters had previously sought sanctuary in a mosque but were threatened with violence by the state. They gave speeches, studied constitutionalism, and learnt from one another in their own 'open-air school'. Persia's first elections took place before the year was out.

A more recent example of protest camping took place in the 1980s, when parts of the peace movement established permanent camps outside military bases. By far the most famous was the women's camp on Greenham Common in Berkshire which blockaded, annoyed and hounded the government and military for more than ten years, until (and after) the missiles were taken away.

Another round of protest camping began in February 1992, when a group of travellers decided to camp on the proposed site of the M3 motorway over

Twyford Down. They were soon joined by environmental activists. Together they remained there for the next 10 months. When an alliance of NGOs and activists began making preparations for a campaign at another site – Oxleas Wood near Greenwich – the government got scared and announced that their planned road project there would not be going ahead.

Campaigners kept building the movement and organised protest camps against preparations for the extension of the M11 in Essex and other roads in Newbury, Newcastle and Glasgow to name only a few. Tactics borrowed from anti-logging activists in North America and Australia such as lock-ons, sabotage and tripods (three poles attached together with a person at the top), fused with home-grown ideas suggested by parts of the climbing community, to stretch both the wits and the budgets of the authorities in their efforts to remove them. Due to the heightened publicity and expense, the roads project became untenable. In 1996, the government decided to abandon its plans and axe plans for 77 new roads. The protesters' efforts had paid off.

Perhaps the most well-known recent movement based on protest camping began in 2005 at a purpose-built non-hierarchical eco-village in Scotland to coincide with that year's G8 in Gleneagles. At daily consensus-based meetings young activists politicised by the Iraq War rubbed shoulders with direct-action old hands from across the world. This was quickly followed by a switch in focus from the summits where decisions were made to the places that CO₂ was emitted. And so preparations for the Camp for Climate Action (Climate Camp) began.

The Climate Camp concept rolls in to one the main characteristics of a training camp, autonomous space and sustainable community. Most importantly, the focus is action – either there or thereafter.

The first Climate Camp took place in summer 2006 on land close to a coal-fired power station called Drax, followed by protests at Heathrow Airport (2007), Kingsnorth Power Station (2008), City of London, Blackheath, Vestas Wind Turbine Factory and Trafalgar Square (2009) and RBS headquarters in Edinburgh (2010). As part of wider campaigns, plans for a third runway at Heathrow and a new power station at Kingsnorth were eventually shelved, while policing was somewhat reformed following the public outcry against the police violence at the 2009 City of London camp. But the movement wasn't only

present in England and Scotland. Climate Camps – or their equivalents – were established in countries including Wales, Ireland, the US, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, France, Germany, Belgium, India, New Zealand, Australia, Ghana and the Ukraine.

Recent protest camps are not the exclusive preserve of the green movement. The No Borders camp at Calais challenges immigration controls both ideologically and practically. A protest camp at Dale Farm in Essex this year helped catapult the issues of racist traveller evictions onto the front pages and resist the bailiffs for longer than would have otherwise been the case. In the USA a protest camp outside the George W Bush's window instigated by Cindy Sheehan (a mother whose son had been killed in Iraq) was a factor in the turning of public opinion in the country both against the war and against Bush.

Then of course there is Egypt, whose 2011 Tahrir Square camp to some extent inspired the current 'Occupy' movement. In an interview for *New Internationalist* earlier this year, activist Gigi Ibrahim called it "a mini-example of what direct democracy looks like. People took charge of everything – trash, food, security. It was a self-sustaining entity. And in the middle of this, under every tent, on every corner, people were having debates about their demands, the future, how things should go economically and politically. It was fascinating. It was a mirror of what Egypt would look like if it was democratic." It is likely that anyone who has participated in the recent wave of 'Occupy' camps would be able to recognise this sentiment.

So it can be seen that protest camping can play a role in bringing about social change. Camps can be spaces for people to debate and learn from one another on a large scale, outside of the structures of authority and hegemony that shape ordinary life. But while the awakening of critical consciousness is central to effective struggle it is not enough. Only by using camps as bases from which direct actions are taken which undermine the interests of the 'haves', are such camps successful in their aims.

Gigi Ibrahim put it thus after the downfall of Mubarak: "if the struggle wasn't there, if the people didn't take to the streets, if the factories didn't shut down, if workers didn't go on strike, none of this would have happened." As the 99% takes on the 'global Mubarak' of undemocratic global institutions and financialised capitalism, it is crucial that we heed those words.



RECLAIMING POWER: THE CLIMATE CAMP SPIRIT LIVES ON IN THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT

November 2011

This week I got hold of a copy of the environmental direct action film *Just Do It*. The documentary follows the lives of a group of people working for climate justice, even when that brings them into conflict with the law. It conveys the passion, creativity and sheer audacity of the Climate Camp movement. It also charts a more subtle shift which is directly relevant to the current global protests.

While opposition to the dominant economic model has always been a feature of Climate Camp, the film shows this critique increasingly coming to the fore. This is most visually reflected in the changing messages of the banners that adorn the different protests. The earliest simply reads 'Welcome to Climate Camp', followed by 'Nature Doesn't Do Bailouts', then 'Capitalism is Crisis'. At the Copenhagen climate talks in December 2009, campaigners from across the world joined behind the banner 'Reclaim Power' – in protest against not just climate change but also the unjust political and economic systems that allow it to perpetuate. Later scenes feature protests which aren't explicitly linked to climate change, but which are in opposition to neo-liberalism.

The extent to which Climate Camp informed the Occupy protests is most obviously apparent in the use of public camping as a protest tactic, but also in the practice of consensus decision-making and the opposition to any economic

model which hurts people and the planet. The 'Capitalism is Crisis' banner even adorns the camp at St Paul's. Echoing the message of the Copenhagen mobilization, the 'Occupy' movement has placed an emphasis on the need for real democracy, particularly highlighting the manner in which the richest 1 per cent prevents supposedly democratic systems from functioning democratically.

In many ways, this is a reiteration of the message of the campaigns that preceded the Climate Camp. For example, one of the most iconic images of the summit protests of the so called anti-globalization movement is the banner hung in Seattle in 1999 with arrows pointing away from one another indicating the opposing directions of the WTO and democracy.

Just Do It captures a year in the life of a small part of a global movement against illegitimate power. The latest face of the global movement continues to highlight environmental problems, but as just one of many ways that the 99 per cent are disadvantaged by the super-rich. Despite the presence of the 'Capitalism is Crisis' banner at St Paul's, the question of whether this means that Occupy is anti-capitalist or not is hotly contested. The debate even extends to the pages of the Occupied Times of London – the newspaper produced by activists at St Paul's and Finsbury Square. Yet whatever the semantics most would be able to agree with the problem as elucidated by one contributor: 'out-of-control corporations hiding money in tax havens, lobbying corrupt politicians frantically for greater deregulation'.

Many times in the past few weeks I have been asked, 'but what do you propose as an alternative to what we have?' The answer I give is the same that has been given by movements through history. The answer is democracy.

WE ARE THE ALTERNATIVE

November 2011

I've come to expect it now: At every book talk I do there is always an inevitable question. Speaking about Occupy and its pre-history at the Edinburgh Radical Book Fair this weekend ahead of a visit to the Edinburgh camp I was asked it again: "What do you expect to replace the current system with?". My answer rarely seems to satisfy those brought up in a world of rigid ideologies. But I believe it from my heart.

Let's start with where we are. The slogan 'We are the 99%' reflects the fact that too much power is concentrated into the hands of too few people. I believe that the further power is distributed in society the better that society will be. And I believe that that route to such a society is for mass movements to challenge and ultimately remove the power of illegitimate elites.

This notion of redistributing power without seizing it seems to particularly flummox parts of the traditional left. But the approach is much older than Occupy. For example in 2003 a contributor to the beautifully illustrated biography of the anti-globalization movement *We Are Everywhere* wrote that "perhaps the greatest advantage of our movement of movements is that it struggles to avoid taking power, seeking instead to shatter it into little pieces, to share it amongst ourselves."

But the argument is yet older. A decade before many of today's younger Occupy activists were born, Andre Gorz wrote: "Taking power implies taking it away from its holders, not by occupying their posts but by making it permanently impossible to keep their machinery of domination running. Revolution is first and foremost the irreversible destruction of this machinery. It implies a form of collective practice capable of bypassing and superseding it through the development of an alternative network of relations".

Even before that the seminal theorist Saul Alinsky characterised his only

ideology as “a belief that if people have the power to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions”. A more eloquent encapsulation of the aims of at least some of the activists in *Occupy* may not have been written, and to my mind is reflected in the *Indignados* slogan now adopted by Occupy LSX ‘Real Democracy Now’. Much of that sentiment lives on. The Occupy movement is sharply critical of the ideology, institutions and – most importantly – the power of the world’s financial elite – the ‘1%’. There are plenty of more just solutions of offer.

Some people choose to emphasise the importance of protecting those uncommodified public institutions that still remain – like hospitals, schools, parks and libraries. Some people advocate state run industries in at least some cases – public transport for example. Some alternatives are independent of state and market – for example community allotments, swap-shops, toy libraries and so on. But the point isn’t to get distracted by arguing about a single economic blueprint, because the best combination would be found with real democracy.

So there is an alternative, the seeds of which are already beginning to emerge. The alternative is resistance.

And within the resistance are born economies and decision-making systems more democratic than any government could ever be. This is what I take as the definition of ‘globalization from below’.

As the first statement from the London Stock Exchange camp explains; ‘We need alternatives, this is where we work towards them.’ As Occupy grows we have the opportunity to work towards them on a global scale.

WE WON'T WIN CHANGE BY ASKING NICELY

November 2011

It is a year now since a group of students broke off from an anti-fees demonstration to occupy the Conservative Party HQ in Millbank Tower. As a cabinet of millionaires prepared legislation to further stamp out the life chances of the country's young, the inevitable explosion of tensions was dramatically played out on every television screen in the land. Yet only 12 months later, what then seemed shocking looks small in the context of a global youth revolt.

As winter deepened, discontent grew as students across the country occupied their lecture theatres. Then in January and February protesters in the Middle East took to the streets and the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt were forced to stand down. In May the *Indignados* in Spain began their campaign against all political parties by defying anti-protest laws and filling public squares. In August hundreds of thousands of young people took to the streets of Israel in opposition to the government's neo-liberal policies, and many of them stayed there in tents. Then in September the occupation of Wall Street began. Inspired by the audacity and resilience of the US campaigners, more than 900 similar protests have since sprung up across the world.

The tactics of the year of unrest did not come from nowhere. For example the *April 6* youth movement in Egypt prepared for the revolution by consulting activists from the Serbian *Otpor* movement which helped bring down Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. *Otpor* in turn were influenced by the work of the US scholar Gene Sharp who has dedicated his life to theorising the dynamics of nonviolent social change. In his most influential work *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, he calls upon the reader to identify the 'Achilles heel' of the regime it is campaigning

against and to find ways to undermine elites' sources of power. If we are to learn from the source rather than the legend, we must take note.

Policy-making is not simply a process of wise officials finding the best solution for the most people. Government policy is a reflection of the balance of power in society. Even if a civil servant presents an objective set of policy options to a minister, the politician responsible must then ask herself 'will I be able to continue governing if I allow this to happen?'. We won't win change by asking nicely. The way to redistribute power in society is by asserting our Counterpower – using our ability to challenge and ultimately remove the power of 'the 1%'.

Young people in Britain may not be taking on a dictatorship, but neither do we live in a democracy where we have control over our lives. As Shiv Malik shows in his book *Jilted Generation* there is a growing gap between the *haves* and *have-nots* which correlates with age. Those of us born after 1979 are less likely to own a house, less likely to be able to afford a car, and less likely to be able get a job, than the previous generation when they were our age. In 1990, 50% of young people under 35 owned houses. In 2010 it was just 29%. Following the economic crisis unemployment amongst 18-25s rose to 20%.

Yet all the blame cannot be placed at the feet of the Tories. We post-79ers have now seen three political parties in government – blue, red and yellow. Every one of them has been wedded to the same ideology of neo-liberalism which has let us down so badly, and if allowed to continue will let the next generation down even more. It is no surprise then, that so many of us have adopted tactics of civil disobedience as a route to social change rather than party politics. However the two are more interconnected than might be expected.

Although polls after the storming of Millbank Tower last year showed that the public generally disapproved of the action, they disapproved of the Conservatives more. Just days after the student protests the Conservative Party fell to second place in the opinion polls and remained there for the succeeding months. What would happen if the offices of every neo-liberal political party was occupied at once? But while daring acts of protest can be catalysts for social change they are not the drivers of it. In between every media moment is the long haul of building community solidarity, progressive worldviews, sustainable movements and local economies. We are under no illusions. The struggle for justice will take a long time. But that is exactly what young people have.

OCCUPY THE NORTH

December 2011

When I was a child, Wigan Pier was a museum with clog dancing, a mock Victorian schoolroom and a boat down the canal to a cotton mill. Last week I visited again. But this time it was empty. The one sign of life was a pub, appropriately called The Orwell. 'What's happened?' I ask the bartender. 'Oh, you know,' came the reply, 'budget cuts.' In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell is an outsider looking in to The North. I am not. Going north is going home. But it now looks different. And it isn't just me that has changed.

My visit to Wigan followed a series of talk and workshops in Salford, Stockport, Manchester, Leeds, Huddersfield, Bradford, Durham, Newcastle and Liverpool. In conversation after conversation, two words were to be heard again and again. Why is the Churchtown museum in Southport shut? Budget cuts. Why is the youth service in Leeds being delivered through a mobile van? Budget cuts. The only silver lining is that the shocks are inspiring people to take to the streets together to campaign for a better world.

This has manifested itself in various ways, but by far the most visual are the Occupy camps: liberated spaces that physically and psychologically defy clone town corporate high streets and sanitized financial districts. There were rarely more than 20 people at the four that I visited, but I left with no doubt that within them are the seeds of something new.

At some sites I facilitated workshops which began by asking people to name one campaign they have been involved in before. The replies were striking. There were a few experienced activists there, but for the vast majority, Occupy was the first political thing they had ever done.

My questions as to what motivated people to get involved were answered at length. One person told me he had applied for more than 80 jobs and not got one of them. Another man dreamt of opening a café, but with no capital, jobs

hard to come by and access to affordable education closed down, didn't see how he could do so. Another person told me he'd been consistently applying for jobs for three years. Staying full time at the camp, and visibly shivering in the Merseyside wind, he told me being involved in Occupy was the best thing he had ever done and he intended to see it through to the end.

There was no sense of tension here between the employed and the unemployed within the camps or beyond them. Among the many images that stick are lorry drivers honking their support, a photographer presenting the Newcastle camp with a picture he'd taken, and some cake decorators promising a cake. I arrived in Liverpool on 30 November – the day of national public service sector strikes – and the city centre was alive with banners, flags, whistles, vuvuzelas and the city's Socialist Singers. By far the largest cheer of the rally went to the Occupy campers braving so many challenges to make their voices heard.

Those challenges are by no means small. The first is the weather and the constant struggle to stop tents from blowing away when there is no grass to peg them in to. As I prepared to begin my workshop at Occupy Newcastle, the sleeping tent almost blew away, triggering an all-hands-on-deck effort to retrieve and re-secure it with ropes, rocks and water butts. The day after my visit to Occupy Leeds a camper told me that the tent I had facilitated my workshop in hadn't survived. The night before my visit to Occupy Liverpool everyone had got soaked in the rain. But still the protesters continue.

Another challenge is safety. The Occupy Manchester camp had to move from its first site because of the challenge of passing drunk people, some of whom sought to stay. By the time I reached them, every camp I visited had adopted a no-alcohol policy.

Another safety challenge is more political. I heard stories of fascists from the English Defence League attacking camps with bricks and threatening to burn tents. In Liverpool I encountered them myself. As the five or six men approached the site, I joined a defensive line around the camp. The EDL's strategy seemed to be to goad one of us into hitting them, to give them the excuse to start a fight. A couple of them started addressing campers by name, searching for weak points. Another snatched a phone from a camper which we succeeded in retrieving. A couple of women then moved in between the lines

to de-escalate the situation until the police arrived. Once they had left, a lively debate ensued. Are the police part of the 99 per cent? What about the EDL? The violent passers-by? And if they are part of the 99 per cent, in whose interests is each of them acting?

If one thing is for sure though, it is in whose interests the government is acting. On the last day of the tour I flicked on the television to be greeted by a very different perspective. In an attempt at spin after the announcement that youth unemployment has risen to record highs, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg was on the news congratulating Starbucks for their plans to expand. I had to rub my eyes. Starbucks, frequently charged with destroying jobs and small businesses through its expansionist tactics, was now being congratulated by the government for 'creating jobs'. There is a word for such a position coined in another Orwell book: doublethink.

The sense of distrust in the words of those who claim to be in authority came across strongly in every conversation. To my mind, the joy of Occupy is that it is a space for seeing beyond the doublethink that prevails in politicians' words and the mainstream media. It is a rejection of the doublethink that cutting jobs and services will create employment. It is a rejection of the doublethink that the way to stop climate change is to consume more. And it is a rejection of the doublethink that the only way to address injustices in society is to join a political party whose policies perpetuate injustice in society. Everywhere I asked campers what they would like me to include in the article I was writing. The answer to this question was almost always the same: 'This is a space to discuss and to come up with our own solutions to the problems we face.'

In the 1960s the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire advocated for education and consciousness-raising to be based on discussion and co-learning. What might now be called 'Freirian' methods can be seen as far back as the 1790s, when workers and artisans met to debate with one another whether they should have a say in the running of their country through electoral democracy. Now, in our struggle for economic democracy, people all over the country, and all over the world, are doing so again.



THE END OF THE BEGINNING

February 2012

Not long after midnight this morning, the bailiffs finally moved in to evict the tents at the Occupy Camp at St Paul's. The message is obvious. The City of London does not want a permanent witness to its excesses on the verge of the London Stock Exchange.

It is over four months now since the first mass meetings on those iconic steps. Perhaps it is fitting that the location is best known across the world for the scene in the film *Mary Poppins* which also features a run on the bank. Now the tour guides will have another story to tell.

The Occupy LSX camp did not seriously challenge the economic or physical power of the financial élite. But it has dented their once mighty ideological hegemony. Think back to autumn 2011. The world was still in the warm glow of the fall of Mubarak, and worried corporate and political élites were trying to spin the unrest as a desire of the rest of the world to adopt the neoliberal systems of the West.

Occupy changed all that, showing how the struggle against dictators in North Africa is part of a struggle for real democracy across the world. The mainstream media swelled with viewpoints rarely heard on the airwaves. Meanwhile, a nascent infrastructure of alternative media channels emerged, including live-streams, social media accounts with thousands of followers and the movement newspaper *Occupied Times*. Spaces dubbed the Tent City University, the Bank of the Ideas and the School of Ideas have provided venues for debate and co-learning outside of the usual hegemonic structures, while outreach programmes have brought the debate far beyond the squares. Amongst all this, St Paul's has gained the status of the world's longest-running Occupy camp.

Perhaps the major criticism levelled against Occupy is that it has not been clear enough in its demands. To some extent this case is made by people who

haven't made an effort. The most cursory Google search can bring up both the principles decided on the second day and the subsequent quite specific demands on the City of London for greater accountability.

Perhaps its most immediate success reflects Saul Alinsky's maxim that 'The threat is often more powerful than thing itself'. When it emerged that Tesco was using unpaid labour to stock its shelves at night as part of the government's 'workfare' programme, #occupytesco started trending on Twitter and Occupy camps started talking seriously about moving the camps indoors. Worried at the prospect of Occupy visiting them, a swathe of companies, including Tesco, withdrew from the practice.

But the point of Occupy is not only to protest. For many participants, Occupy represents an experiment in building a different network of relations capable of bypassing the power structures as they stand. But if this has been Occupy's strength, it has also been its weakness. Creating new societies in the shadow of the old has its benefits. But to dismantle the power structures of the figurative 1 per cent will at some point mean taking the 1 per cent on directly.

If we take a historical perspective, there is no need for downheartedness. The movement of the 99 per cent is still young and only in the first stage of building mass consciousness. In order to build the strength to confront the illegitimate élites, the movement must first co-ordinate the infrastructure to do so. That must be the next stage. You cannot evict an idea. And as Occupy court defendant George Barda put it to the BBC today: this isn't the beginning of the end, it's the end of the beginning.

PROTEST CHANGE POLITICS MORE THAN POLITICIANS DO

May 2012

In the week that follows elections, political types of all colours like to pore over the results and search for meaning within them. Indeed there is much that can be deduced – especially on the micro-level of council wards. Could that block have been canvassed better? Did the incumbent councillor's casework pay off? Could the vote have been mobilized more efficiently?

That such factors played a role in last week's council elections is not in doubt. Yet the maxim 'all politics is local' is only partially true. Some patterns played out across the country: the ruling Conservatives saw losses,* support for their coalition partners the Liberal Democrats haemorrhaged, while Labour and the Greens made gains at the governing parties' expense.

Ed Miliband responded by declaring that 'Labour are back' and the Green London mayoral candidate Jenny Jones used her election night speech to express her joy at the Greens becoming London's third party, declaring that they deserved it after such hard work.

Of course, it is true that nearly every candidate and canvasser works superhuman hours at election time. But that alone doesn't explain the result. A look at opinion polls since 2010 shows that the national swing against the government has been catalysed, if not driven, by popular protest.

The Conservatives first fell behind in November 2010, only a few days after the mass student march against tuition fees, and the occupation of Conservative Party Headquarters at Millbank Tower. During the winter of 2010, UK UNCUT put corporate tax-dodging in the media spotlight by occupying High Street shops, while students kept tuition fees on the agenda by escalating their

street protests and occupying lecture theatres. Following this, polls showed a rise in the number of people seeing the cuts as unfair, too deep, too fast, and bad for the economy, as well as opinion hardening against tuition fees. The Conservatives fell 10 points behind in the polls and 29 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters said they were less likely to vote the same again.

By the time of the 500,000 strong 'March for the Alternative' on 26 March 2011, polls showed a majority of people supportive of the campaign against the cuts. Come winter 2011, with the Occupy protests dominating the headlines, more people claimed to support the aims (if not the tactics) of the movement than to be opposed to them. As Occupy part 1 faded, it would seem that at least some of that anti-government sentiment translated into votes for the opposition Labour Party and, where they are a viable force, the Greens.

On the face of it, there is a certain irony here. With the exception of some trade unions, influencing voting behaviour is not a stated aim of any of the movements that appear to have played a role in doing so. Indeed, although some social movement campaigners – myself included – took time out to canvass for more radical candidates last week, and some even stood for election themselves, others refused – perceiving the act of voting as legitimizing a system that offers only a façade of democracy. But the political eco-system is more complex than narrow ideological boundaries allow. The actions of one group can affect the actions of others, whether they intend it to or not.

With their highly paid pollsters, politicians probably know this, but in their role as media commentators they tend to underplay the role of social movements on the results. Instead, they imply that elections are the primary drivers of progressive social change, and politicians the agents. But the statistics don't bear this out. At best, elections are barometers of who has power in society. It is the struggles in between that count.

* Analyses of Boris Johnson's electoral success in London focus on his being seen as a separate electoral 'brand' from the Conservative Party, as well as the support provided by the powerful London Newspaper *The Evening Standard*.

WHAT'S GOING ON WITH OCCUPY IN THE US?

July 2012

In Madison, Wisconsin, you can't avoid politics. The graffiti outside the state Capitol Building, the snatches of overheard discussions in the bars, and the commemorative cards at the radical bookstore all relate to one thing: the events that have unfolded since the rebellion of March 2011.

Against the backdrop of events in Tunisia and Egypt, months before the advent of Occupy Wall Street, thousands of students, trade unionists and generally disgruntled citizens occupied their state senate for 17 days straight, to protest the passing of a bill that would sharply curtail trade union rights. Doctors signed sick notes so people could join. Even the police union declared solidarity with the protest. The Democrats in the Senate left the state to make the house inquorate and delay the bill.

Since then there have been recall elections for the governor and several senators. Although the much-reviled governor managed to retain his seat, the Democrats gained control of the legislature. On the day of my visit, power is being formally transferred. For the activists I speak to it feels like a small victory compared to the aims of the campaign. But the wider win may already have happened. The Wisconsin Uprising of 2011 showed that the spirit of the Arab Spring is not confined to the Arab world. Through their actions they demonstrated that the movement for people power is universal, paving the way for Occupy Wall Street.

I've spent the last few weeks touring bookstores in the US, giving talks about tactics adopted by social movements through history. In every city I visit there are visual clues to a much more recent history: that of the Occupy camps. On Wall Street it is the letters 'OWS' etched into the back of an empty shop

window. In Pittsburgh the privately owned open space renamed the 'People's Park' by the city's Occupy presence is still fenced off – apparently in breach of local bylaws. In Oakland, dried mud serves as a reminder of the decision of city authorities to leave sprinklers on when the city square was occupied. And at Philadelphia's biggest Quaker meeting house there are signs of the movement continuing: a flipchart full of thank you messages from activists who had used the space during the Occupy National Gathering the previous week.

Following the Gathering, 50 or so activists opted to walk '99 miles for the 99%' back to Wall Street, generating press attention along the way, especially given the 99 degree heat. But overall there has been a shift away from this kind of symbolic action, towards more dispersed grassroots solidarity work alongside the communities most affected by the ongoing economic crisis.

One such project is *Occupy Vacant Lots*. The effects in the US of financial globalization are hard to miss, especially the shells of disused factories that blight deprived areas like North Philadelphia. In response, Occupiers in Philadelphia and beyond have teamed up with locals to regenerate the areas in to urban community gardens whilst others have taken to the countryside to establish sustainable farms.

Another project with traction variously takes the name *Occupy our Homes* or *Occupy Foreclosure*. An example of this in action began in February of this year, when PNC Bank ordered the Cruz family to return their keys within 48 hours. Instead the family opted to give the keys to the local Occupy movement. They kept 24-hour watch over the building, successfully resisting bailiffs three times. Meanwhile activists trailed Bank Executive Dan Taylor around public events, asking challenging questions.

New alliances

Replicated across states, and twinned with the actions of the longer-standing groups that assist people to renegotiate their mortgages, this tactic is beginning to have an effect. In parts of California, new alliances have declared Foreclosure Prevention Zones (FPZs) providing a locus for activity, and an opportunity for local politicians to lend their support. Meanwhile, an even more radical (although somewhat quieter) strand of the movement works with homeless people to rehouse them in vacated properties.

In Pittsburgh, new alliances have been built with campaigners for better

public transport, resulting in protests escalating from polite petitions to full-scale disobedience. In Maryland, citizens protesting the disparity between spending on prisons and education went so far as to build a temporary school on the site of a proposed prison.

In New York too, the alliance building is clear. Open-air info-shops around the capital direct people to a union picket where utilities workers have walked out on strike for the first time in 27 years, having been locked out of negotiations with management. The workers I spoke to said they are willing to stay out for as long as it takes, whilst the Occupy Wall Street activists present gave solid support. In Wisconsin, Occupy activists are going a step further – supplying not just solidarity but sustenance to workers at Pizza Palermo's, out on strike for days on end for the very right to form a union at all.

Despite the groundswell of activity, I get the sense that activists are tired and soul-searching. Over and over I hear some familiar questions: how could it be that so much effort could lead to change happening so slowly? Could it be that the grassroots rebellion from Madison onwards is in the process of being channelled into tactics less troubling to the powers that be and therefore less effective? Or, conversely, should the movement be more willing to engage with hierarchical institutions and hierarchical methods of organizing?

Finding focus

Whatever answers the movement finds, and whatever name it chooses for its next stage, there is undoubtedly a shift taking place. As an activist in New York put it to me: 'Anger can only last so long. We need to focus that anger.' Another observed: 'Occupy has too many groups. If we're to continue building we need some kind of structure to hold it together.' A Philadelphian activist echoed the sense of change, observing: 'At first we just had to announce events and people would come. It was magical. Now we're really putting in the legwork.'

To my eye, the shift is indicative of the transition that every successful movement must make, from initial consciousness-raising to the harder job of co-ordinating the building of a mass movement, radical and resilient enough to have a realistic chance of effecting change. There might be fewer headlines now, but the words daubed on the pavement in front of Wisconsin's Capitol building serve just as well: 'This is far from over.'



Photo by Jessica Lehrman

THE TROUBLE WITH ETCHING CHANGE IN STONE

August 2012

As a veteran of the civil rights movement, numerous anti-war movements and an associate of the Black Panthers (not to mention a speaker at Occupy Wall Street), Angela Davis knows a thing or two about campaigning. When her political views were used as an excuse to sack her from her teaching post in 1969 campaigning got her re-instated. When she was imprisoned in the early 1970s campaigning got her acquitted and released. And despite considerable efforts to smear her over the years, today she is one of the USA's most respected radical scholars. In her new book, *The Meaning of Freedom* she offers a word of advice to younger activists: 'Our victories attained by freedom movements are never etched in stone.'

The uninitiated could be forgiven for thinking this was otherwise. Despite the US Government's longstanding tendency to repress existing radical social movements, publicly funded monuments to revolutionary struggles of the past are not only etched but carved into stone in many city centers.

This is perhaps most prominently the case in Boston where a red line in the pavement (dubbed the 'Freedom Trail') leads around statues to some of the protagonists of the American Revolution and the places where the story was played out. For a fee you can even board a replica boat and re-enact the most famous direct action in US history by dumping pretend tea chests (on ropes) into Boston Harbor.

But there is something unsettling about the way it is presented. The Freedom Trail ends in a naval dockyard - final resting place of the USS Constitution - next to a museum which charts the beginnings of American military interventions abroad (to 'protect American freedoms' and 'defend

commerce'). It is almost as if to say 'that's it, show's over, we've got our freedom now'. The words 'Revolutionary Boston' are even accompanied by a registered service mark.

Revolution is a participatory ongoing process, not a period in history, and certainly not a tradable commodity. For many working class people, women, native Americans and people of color, the American Revolution was no real kind of revolution at all; and despite progress on some fronts those struggles live on today. How different would the effect of the Freedom Trail be if it encouraged people to think about who today's elites are, and what kind of struggle might be necessary to continue the cause of global freedom against them?

Another story frequently recounted in the nation's official autobiography is the struggle for African American freedom, perhaps symbolized most iconically by a giant monument to Martin Luther King Jr. in Washington DC, flanked by uplifting (if non-specific) quotes. Again though, imagine: how different the effect would be if the designers instead chose to inscribe those writings where King speaks of his 'anti-capitalistic' outlook? What would people think if there was a reminder that according to a Senate investigation, the FBI tried to 'break' him? And I wonder if, in the context of the recent 'Occupy DC' camp people draw the parallels with the 'Poor People's Encampment' King established in the same public park?

Often at book talks I quote the US trade unionist Nicholas Klein, who – before Gandhi adapted and immortalized the words – declared 'first they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they attack and want to burn you, then they build monuments to you'. Some people have responded by asking whether the erection of monuments represents the final act of co-optation by the establishment.

Histories as presented by official museums tend to present freedom struggles as evidence that the US is a place where liberties have been consistently extended since independence, somehow as a characteristic of the country itself. To some extent social movements have used this to their advantage. In their introduction to their book *Dreaming in Public* Amy Schrager Lang and Daniel Lang/Levitsky characterize US movements of the 20th century and before as implying through their rhetoric that 'a 'true' America was lurking within the real one, if only we could recover it'. Although they argue

that Occupy tentatively steps away from this tendency, it seems to be there for the progressive movement more broadly. For example, according to an activist quoted in Pittsburgh's independent *New People* newspaper 'there are two Americas; the America of Popular Democracy and the America of Empire' continuing 'I fight to extend the former and to reduce the latter'.

But however activists define themselves, and however much the radicalism is played down by government memorials, such monuments, if accompanied by reading the words of the activists themselves, could still strengthen movements for the redistribution of power. As Howard Zinn puts it 'Human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places — and there are so many — where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act'.

The threat of the gains won by magnificent behavior is another incentive to campaign. And on this, the words of Angela Davis are a further call to action: 'what we often perceive under one set of historical circumstances as glorious triumphs of mass struggle can later ricochet against us if we do not continually reconfigure the terrain of our struggle.' The struggle must go on, but learning from the past doesn't mean copying it, it means considering and finding the right tactics for our moment in history.



Photo by C IDJ photography

PAST TENTS, FUTURE PERFECT?

February 2013

A year after the eviction of the St Paul's camp, it is popular to say that Occupy (as we knew it) is dead. Or so goes the accepted wisdom in Britain at least. Every time I mention my involvement in Occupy at a social gathering I am asked whether I think it was successful or not. Although smaller scale actions continue under the Occupy banner, I am left with the worry that we face the prospect of losing the momentum of this international burst of creative rage and returning to campaigning as usual.

Analysing the effects of Occupy Part 1 will take years yet. As Mike Marqusee argued in the December/January issue of *Red Pepper*, we sometimes don't know the very direct effects of our actions until much later. In that case he was referring to taking part in anti-Vietnam war protests as a 16 year old boy, who wouldn't know until Nixon's memoirs were published that the movement he was part of helped avert the use of nuclear weapons.

His argument links to a question I enjoy asking to begin talks or workshops: 'What were the tactics that were central to the ousting of Mubarak in Egypt?' The answers given differed according to who I was speaking with. Trade unionists tended to name the threat of a general strike, community organisers mentioned the links between different sectors of society, and so on. Whenever I asked this at an Occupy camp though, one tactic was named above all the others: the tented occupation of Tahrir Square.

This is perhaps unsurprising, but what did surprise me was the number of Occupy activists who went on to argue that if the camps could be sustained for long enough the movement would achieve its aims. Others said they didn't know if it was going to make a difference but it was worth a go – and in so doing

were probably closer to having a defensible analysis. But does that mean that we should collectively continue doing things that don't seem to work? As Saul Alinsky writes in *Rules of Radicals* – a tactic that drags becomes a drag.

Of course working out which tactics work in which context will take a certain amount of trial and error and an ongoing process of innovation. But, despite all the caveats, when we take the long view we *can* identify some general principles for a successful campaign (success in this instance defined as redistributing power from the *haves* to the *have-nots*). An obvious example is the observation that if movement actions are principally based on seeking to persuade elites rather than challenging the foundations of their power, movements will only have the capacity to win small changes within the system as it stands. In contrast to the campaigns of many mainstream NGOs, Occupy – in rhetoric at least – *did* seek to challenge rather than engage with power. But did it succeed?

The list of Occupy's partial achievements are well rehearsed – it helped change the debate, involved new people, catalysed the Boycott Workfare protests and so on. But did our central tactic get us closer to our ultimate aim of recreating the economic system? Although meant as satire, when comedian Stewart Lee compared using tents against capitalism to using 'bows and arrows against the lightning' in a 2012 issue of *The Occupied Times* he had a point. The reason, he argued, that public opposition to global capitalism hasn't yet reached a tipping point is 'precisely because its real crimes don't conclude in physical space itself, but in a virtual world of virtual money and virtual profit.'

In *From Dictatorship to Democracy* Gene Sharp advises that every regime has an Achilles' Heel – a weak point. If strategically targeted, nonviolent action can not only win concessions but bring oppressive structures crashing down. So what is the Achilles' Heel of the current financial system?

In Occupy Part 1 – implicitly at least – I think we assumed that the system's Achilles' Heel was the buildings and squares of financial districts that can be occupied with our bodies. There is plenty of evidence for the efficacy of the tactic. In recent history, almost every successful physical close-down of a stock exchange, summit meeting, political party office or tax dodging shop has had some kind of impact. Sometimes the tactic has led to changes in policy, frequently to potential targets changing their behaviour before they have an occupation of their own to deal with, often it has catalysed other movements and

changed the public debate, and almost always such 'economic regulation from below' has meant that organisations contemplating immoral practices have to incorporate the costs of protests into their balance sheets. But can this alone be our response to 'virtual money and virtual profit'? After all, however many financial districts we occupy, the imaginary digits that measure the speculation of global finance still seem to tick.

Perhaps then, the Achilles' Heel of financial capitalism is labour. Again we can certainly point to historical and present times and places where a strike (or threat of a strike) - particularly in the resources sector - could influence the direction of our economic system. Theoretically, trade unionism amongst finance sector workers could make some difference to the direction of the economy, a general strike would be a genuine challenge to the security of the government and a rise in employee-run workplaces could signal the beginnings of a quiet revolution. But what about full time parents? The unemployed? The retired? Children? Students? The precarious mass of freelancers who disguise the severity of Britain's employment statistics? All of these people are amongst those most hurt by the current regime and least able to participate if the withdrawal of paid labour is seen as our principal method of resistance. A strike of unpaid labour would be a very interesting idea, but still problematic when nappies need changing and relatives need caring for.

In the past few months there have been murmurings about developing another form of resistance. It is based on the view that the central commodity of the British economy is not stuff but debt, which banks create, buy, and sell. Proponents make the case that the 1% are overwhelmingly creditors and the 99% are largely debtors or ineligible for credit. With this analysis, the beginnings of what could form a new focus for the movement are being born. Already in Spain, movements resisting house reposessions born of debt are bearing fruit in the shape of a moratorium on evictions. Already we are familiar with the longstanding movement demand of a debt jubilee for poor countries. What if that could be escalated into a full blown debt rebellion?

In May 2012, a new strand of the Occupy movement began. Following a 50,000-person march on Wall Street, a General Assembly was called where debt was declared an instrument of coercion that makes democracy impossible. In actions growing out of it, people burnt their bills and threw them in the river -

a physical action helping to build the consciousness of participants as being not only part of the 99%, but having a more specific identity, a new subjectivity usually laced with shame: the debtor.

Next, and best known, came the idea of a 'Rolling Jubilee' – involving Occupy Wall Street activists fundraising to buy cut price debt on secondary markets, but then instead of suing for it, simply cancelling it. Donations of just under \$500,000 have led to nearly \$10 million of debt being written off. Now the movement is contacting all the people they have cancelled the debts of, and telling them that Occupy Wall Street did it. No-one thinks this alone will cancel all debt, never-mind bring down capitalism, but it is exposing the injustices and vagaries of the debt system. Alongside this, more challenging action is being encouraged through a freely available 'Debt Resisters' Handbook'. Strike Debt UK was formed later in the year.

But we don't need to expect the peak of the rebellion to take place tomorrow. After the initial consciousness-raising stage of a movement (manifested in this case through the tented encampments) comes the co-ordination stage, when activists become organisers and seek to build the networked resilient mass movement that will be necessary to move to the third stage of non-cooperation taking place on a large enough scale that it is capable of being effective. Now is the time to plan: How many variations of resistance could there be? Which would be most targeted? How can we build towards them? And build we must. With an enemy even more pervasive than the empires of the past, our resistance will need to reach a scale never seen before.

Such a stages model changes the way we evaluate our actions. It means that next time someone asks whether the first stage of the Occupy movement was a success; the answer can be that it is impossible to say. This is partly because, as Marqusee observes, we often don't know the effects of our actions until long after they've happened. But it is also because of a bigger point: whether Occupy Part 1 was a phenomenal success or an abject failure largely depends on what we do next.



Biography

Tim Gee is the author of *Counterpower: Making Change Happen*, shortlisted for the Bread and Roses Prize. He has written about activism for the *New Internationalist*, *The Guardian*, *The Scotsman*, *The Occupied Times of London*, *The Journal of Occupied Studies*, *Adbusters* and *Peace News* amongst others. He has also contributed chapters about *Occupy* to two books. He works as a grassroots trainer.

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Photo by Andrea Bakacs

On 15 October 2011 the world witnessed one of the biggest ever simultaneous acts of protest, as people in 900 places across the globe took to the streets under the banner of 'Occupy'. One of those places was London, where tents were set up on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral, going on to become the longest standing Occupy camp in the world.

In the year that followed, author and activist Tim Gee met with Occupy protesters from across the US and UK and listened to their stories. Written in the heat of the struggle, *You Can't Evict an Idea* is a view from the front line of what happened, the impact it had, and most of all, what we can learn from the experience.



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